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Carter's Record on Confronting Iran

Despite dark hints of military reprisals, President Carter's crackdown on Iran won't lead to armed conflict if he adheres to his past pattern.

This is the assessment of military advisers who have dealt with the White House throughout the Iranian crisis. The introspective, indecisive Carter has held back from military measures at every turn in the emergency. Repeatedly he has approached a military confrontation but has always backed away at the last minute. Here is the confrontation record:

- When the shah began to lose his grip on Iran; the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged Carter to send a nuclear task force into the Persian Gulf as a show of support. They argued that the United States had to demonstrate its willingness to defend its oil sources. The President agreed to dispatch a naval force, led by the carrier Constellation, from the Philippines to the Persian Gulf. Then he decided the move was too provocative and canceled the order.

- After the Iranian militants overran the U.S. Embassy and seized the American hostages, Carter broadcast reassurances that the United States would not be provoked into a military response. Not until his advisers pleaded that it would be better to keep the Iranians guessing did he speak of possible military reprisals and rush naval reinforcements into the area. But he continued to make so many conflicting statements that even his own joint chiefs were unsure of his policy.

- The president gave advisers the impression last December that he was ready to order a precision strike against the Iranian island of Kharg. This is Iran's great oil port in the Per-

sian Gulf. The strangling of Iranian oil exports, the analysts calculated, would hurt Iran more than it would the West. They estimated that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had to ship between 2.5 million and 3.5 million barrels of crude a day to avert an economic collapse. But Carter couldn't bring himself to sign the order.

- The president has moved 30 warships and 1,800 Marines into the crisis zone. The original intention was also to deploy at least one carrier task force right in the Persian Gulf. The move was scheduled last December, but he decided at the last minute to keep the ships at a safer, less provocative distance.

Defense Secretary Harold Brown, meanwhile, pressed for a larger military buildup in the troubled area. In a secret memo to the president, Brown reported: "By combining Marine Corps amphibious units normally afloat in the Mediterranean and the western Pacific, we could rapidly assemble and deploy a small Marine Amphibious Brigade. This would provide some limited near-term presence and combat capability ashore

... Deployments above [this] level could be sustained for only a few weeks without causing severe personnel rotation and equipment maintenance problems." Carter has hesitated to make this extra commitment.

- Brown has asked the president for enough logistical support, according to a secret estimate, to maintain "approximately 10,000 Marines for approximately 15 days." But Carter has held up his approval.

- He is considering a naval blockade as his next move to tighten the screws on Iran. Intelligence reports warn that the Soviet Union has offered to help

break the blockade if it is imposed. The president's inclination, military advisers say, is to back away from a military confrontation with the Soviets. But lately Carter has been under intense political pressure to end the Iranian stalemate. The same advisers who have privately deplored his hesitancy to take firm measures against Iran in the past are now concerned that he might go too far and do something precipitous. Amateurs in the world power game, like Carter, sometimes tend to overreact, the professionals say.